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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 DJIBOUTI 000307

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD

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ER, SO, DJ
SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN PAYNE DISCUSSES REGIONAL ISSUES WITH GODJ

REF: 09 DJIBOUTI 150; 09 DJIBOUTI 117

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. During an April 11-13 visit in Djibouti, CODEL Payne discussed regional challenges with Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh and other top GODJ officials. After speaking with President Guelleh about the ongoing Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute, Representative Payne traveled via U.S. Milair to the Djiboutian military base at Moulhoule, some 15km from the disputed border region, for on-the-ground briefings, and later met with 19 Eritrean prisoners of war in GODJ custody in Djibouti City. Representative Payne's conversations with GODJ leaders also focused on economic growth in Djibouti and Somalia, combating the Somali piracy threat, and advancing efforts to improve security on the ground in Somalia. Both the President and the Foreign Minister expressed concern over the convergence of extremist elements in the vicinity of Kismaayo, Somalia, and urged USG support to security forces of the unity government. Following his visit to Djibouti, Representative Payne traveled to Nairobi, via an independently arranged trip to Mogadishu. END SUMMARY.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

¶2. (U) CODEL Payne and Ambassador met with President Guelleh and Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf in separate meetings April ¶11. President Guelleh thanked Representative Payne for his visit, and said that the Representative was "well known in this region as a man who tries to help African peoples, put African concerns on the table with the U.S. government, and assist in resolving regional misunderstandings." Youssouf also said that he deeply appreciated Representative Payne's ongoing support for USG assistance to the region in education and health. In Djibouti, Youssouf added, USAID has been "very active," but now lacks enough resources to continue its work at the same level. (NOTE. USAID programs in Djibouti have shrunk to \$3 million from a high of \$20 million. END NOTE). Representative Payne complimented Djibouti for its recent economic strides forward, as embodied by the January 2009 completion of the \$300 million Doraleh Container Terminal and the expanded luxury Kempinski hotel, built by the Nakheel arm of Dubai Ports World. Representative Payne added that consolidated regional stability could lead to even greater economic gains, including increased revenues from tourism.

SOMALI PIRACY

¶3. (C) President Guelleh noted that the European Union, China, India, Turkey, Iran, and other forces were getting involved to tackle the growing piracy threat off the coast of Somalia. However, he told Representative Payne, Djibouti has maintained "from the beginning" that it is impossible to combat piracy without solving the problems on the ground in Somalia, so that the pirates cannot even "leave the coast." Foreign Minister Yousseuf underscored this message, saying that although "we can send as many warships as we want," it will be impossible to really halt piracy without "tackling the grassroots reasons" behind the phenomenon. Piracy, Yousseuf said, is a "symptom of the political situation in Somalia." Djibouti has been working with the international community to put this political situation "back on track," but challenges remain. The main priority, Yousseuf told Representative Payne, should be to strengthen Somali security forces as a "prerequisite" for institution-building. In addition, Yousseuf argued that some of the money being spent on "offshore" protection against piracy might be better moved to tackle "onshore" issues. Yousseuf also underlined the need for public messaging to the

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Somali people on piracy issues. Given Somalia's traditionally oral culture, Yousseuf suggested that the BBC Somali service or other radio services would be appropriate vehicles for such outreach. Representative Payne said that he agreed with Yousseuf on Djibouti's comprehensive approach to the piracy threat.

SOMALIA SECURITY SITUATION

¶4. (C) President Guelleh told Representative Payne that the GODJ was concerned about a large gathering of extremists in far southern Somalia, and said that Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys would soon travel to this location with one hundred to two hundred supporters. Foreign Minister Yousseuf said that according to information received by the GODJ, over 400 foreign fighters had already arrived in Kismaayo. Aweys, President Guelleh said, was looking to declare a rival government and seek negotiations with President Sharif in Doha. This scenario, President Guelleh said, could "completely destroy all our efforts from the beginning" with the Djibouti Process. Furthermore, President Guelleh warned, Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaida now "know they are weaker" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and are searching for a new base in Africa, perhaps in Algeria or Somalia. He added, however, that Somalia's flat topography would deny Al-Qaida "places to hide."

¶5. (SBU) President Guelleh also said that without "genuine Somali security forces," it would be impossible to establish a real government and assure the Somali people of its efficacy. Foreign Minister Yousseuf said that the GODJ was interested in "trilateral" cooperation to provide training to Somali security forces in Djibouti, and asked for Representative Payne's support for this initiative. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner had already indicated France's interest in such an arrangement during his February trip to Djibouti (ref A), Yousseuf said, while Japan had also recently signaled that it was "ready" to help. Yousseuf also urged that the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA)

be involved in potential programming to train Somali security forces, stressing that CJTF-HOA already has the necessary "experience, information, and logistics."

SOMALIA RECONCILIATION & REGIONAL SUPPORT

¶6. (C) On President Sharif's ongoing reconciliation efforts, Foreign Minister Yousseuf said that it was "not the point to open up the records" and "dwell on memory." Instead, the best course of action was for President Sharif to gather as many people as possible together, and focus on going forward. President Guelleh praised President Sharif for his "tremendous efforts" to improve security at every level, and noted that the new government was willing to make every effort needed for reconciliation.

¶7. (C) Yousseuf said that whereas previously, Djibouti and Ethiopia did not "see eye to eye" on Somalia issues, now there was a "greater regional consensus" on the way forward for Somalia. This better regional "common vision" was buttressed, Yousseuf said, by a sense that the U.S. had recently begun, during the late months of the previous administration and the beginning of the current administration, to re-engage Somalia, opening a door it had previously "sealed off." Representative Payne said that he was "very appreciative" of Djiboutian efforts to forward Somali reconciliation, and said that he thought that President Obama was

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"very open" to examining U.S. policy towards the greater region. Representative Payne promised President Guelleh that he would urge President Obama and his team to focus attention on the Horn of Africa.

ERITREA & IRAN

¶8. (C) Eritrea, Foreign Minister Yousseuf said, was the only outlier to the growing "regional convergence of views" on Somalia. "We need Eritrea to back off and stop interfering in Somalia," Yousseuf told Representative Payne. Yousseuf said that the GODJ had raised the issue of Iranian support to Eritrea with Iranian President Ahmadinejad during his late February trip to Djibouti. The GODJ was concerned, Yousseuf said, that Iran was helping support Eritrean interference in Somalia by delivering weapons through the port of Assab, and allowing Eritrea to become a "forwarding channel" for delivering arms to "extremists" within Somalia. Yousseuf said that Iran had a "renewed interest in the region," as evidenced by a recent exchange of visits, including "many" visits between Teheran and Asmara. Djibouti, Yousseuf said, was trying to limit its relationship with Iran to "civil cooperation." In contrast, he noted, the GODJ had unconfirmed information that there were Iranian-provided anti-aircraft missiles stationed at Assab and Massawa.

¶9. (C) Our "neighbor to the north," President Guelleh said, "will never listen to others, and wants to bring our small country into war." President Guelleh commented that while President Isaias might "not care if he loses all his youth," Guelleh himself could not "take this liberty to lose Djiboutian citizens." It was easy for Isaias to wage war, President Guelleh said, with no effective "government, parliament, or democracy" to check him. While Isaias wants to "link his problem with Ethiopia" to the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute (ref B), Djibouti is "not interested" in this argument.

¶10. (C) Also on the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute, Foreign Minister Yousseuf said that the GODJ had "tried all diplomatic approaches" to solve the problem. Noting that the current standoff was "detrimental to the whole region," Yousseuf asked Representative Payne to use any channels he had to Eritrea to help move the situation. Of special concern to the GODJ, Yousseuf said, was the Eritrean refusal to provide information about possible Djiboutian prisoners of war (POWs) in Eritrean custody to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or any other party. Djibouti, Yousseuf said, had provided a list of Eritrean POWs to the ICRC shortly after the June border clash. Yousseuf also said the GODJ was concerned at a growing number of Eritrean defectors/deserters under Djiboutian control, saying that the numbers were increasing daily, and that four additional deserters/defectors had come over the border in the course of the previous day. Representative Payne told Yousseuf that he had previously succeeded in approaching President Isaias on other POW issues, and that he would be willing to broach this situation as well.

¶11. (C) In response to a question from Representative Payne about Eritrea's motivations, Yousseuf said that nobody really understood why Eritrea had begun building trenches at Ras Doumeira in early 2008, when relations between the two countries had been normal,

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with regular cross-border movements of people and goods. The biannual Djibouti-Eritrea border committee, composed of regional officials from both countries, had met only two months before the clash, and the issue of Ras Doumeira had not been raised. On the way forward, Yousseuf said that the GODJ was awaiting the UN Security Council's next steps, including possibly a renewed approach to Eritrea from UN Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe. Djibouti, Yousseuf said, continued to maintain troops in drawn-back position near the border, and had no intention of "embarking on any adventures."

ON THE GROUND AT MOULHOULE

¶12. (SBU) Congressman Payne, Ambassador, CJTF-HOA Deputy Commander, and EmbOffs made a trip April 11 to the Djibouti Armed Forces (FAD) military base at Moulhoule, some 15km from the Djibouti-Eritrea border at Ras Doumeira. Upon arrival, base commander Colonel Abdourahman Cher briefed Representative Payne on the history of the conflict and the current situation. Although he said that there were some "historical antecedents" for the current border dispute, and referenced a clash in 1996, Colonel Cher stressed that

Djibouti-Eritrea relations had recently been quite good, with joint projects such as a road between Obock and Assab under consideration, a bilateral border commission meeting every six months, and "exchanges at all levels."

¶13. (C) Colonel Cher outlined the timeline of events leading up to the June 10-12 border clash, with Eritrean forces beginning to build trenches and other fortifications in April 2008. The actual clash, Colonel Cher said, was provoked when Eritrea, which had been losing defectors/deserters for some time, gave the Djiboutian forces an ultimatum on June 10 that if they did not return the latest round of defectors/deserters, Eritrea would attack within one hour. Previously, Colonel Cher noted, Djibouti had returned Eritrean defectors/deserters, but had made a decision to stop doing so after coming to believe that returnees were often executed immediately. Colonel Cher said that he proposed to the Eritrean local commander that both forces retreat one kilometer, in order to avoid tensions over defectors/deserters. His offer, Colonel Cher said, was rebuffed. Although the one-hour deadline passed without incident, Colonel Cher said, Eritrea later attacked at about 18:00 local time, while most of the Djiboutian soldiers were praying. The subsequent conflict lasted 36 hours. Since these events, Colonel Cher said, the FAD has withdrawn three kilometers, while Eritrean forces are still occupying their initial positions, and have reinforced their troops with additional manpower and weaponry. Asked whether the initial clash could have been accidental, Colonel Cher clarified that he believed the attack to have been an act of "deliberate will" by Eritrea.

¶14. (C) Colonel Cher emphasized that the prolonged standoff was taking a heavy toll on the FAD and the GODJ. Local residents are also impacted, as related communities on either side of the border are no longer able to move freely and visit family members. Eritrean desertion, Colonel Cher said, was continuing, with at least five Eritrean defectors/deserters in the last ten days. In response to a question from Representative Payne, Colonel Cher said that the Eritrean defectors/deserters tended to be younger conscripts. The forces stationed on the Eritrean side of the border, he said, were in general originally from other regions of Eritrea, rather than from the immediate border region.

VISITING 19 ERITREAN POWS

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¶15. (SBU) On April 12, CODEL Payne and PolOff visited the 19 Eritrean POWs in Djiboutian custody at Nagad Detention Center in Djibouti City. The 19 POWs, dressed in civilian clothes, appeared to be in general good health. After meeting with the POWs in a separate conference room, CODEL Payne toured their quarters. The accommodations, which appeared adequate, were more akin to converted dormitory space than to a traditional prison layout. The POWs had access to several linked rooms with beds, a television, and other furniture. Adequate bedding and mosquito netting were available, and there were adequate toilet and washing facilities, as well as a tap for potable water.

¶16. (SBU) Speaking through informal translators, several POWs reported that they were getting enough to eat, and had been well treated since their capture. They reported that they had been allowed access to books and television, and had been allowed to contact their families. However, several mentioned that the prison environment was mentally tough, and said that two or three of their number had become depressed. One POW was visibly withdrawn from the group; the POWs reported that he had suffered an apparent

mental breakdown in custody, and had been visited by a doctor, although no medication had been prescribed. None of the POWs reported any mistreatment. Asked whether they would like to return to Eritrea if freed, two POWs said that they would wish to return, one indicated that he would prefer to seek another alternative, and another mentioned that the POWs might not feel comfortable responding to this question in a group meeting format, and with GODJ officials present at all times. Several POWs asked Representative Payne to assist in contacting family members whom they had not been able to notify of their whereabouts. Representative Payne told the group that he would seek to provide information on the names and conditions of the POWs to the government of Eritrea. GODJ officials provided CODEL Payne a list of the Eritrean POWs' names and ages, as well as a list of the presumed Djiboutian MIA/POW.

OTHER MEETINGS

¶17. (SBU) During the visit to Djibouti, CODEL Payne also visited the port, met with the Minister of Health, and consulted with the Somalia Business and Investment Council (SBIC). Although Embassy staff did not attend the last meeting, we understand it focused on the role of the private sector in generating employment for youth. SBIC members also pressed for an end to sanctions impacting the Barakat money transfer firm.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) The GODJ meetings highlighted Djibouti's continued focus on security in Somalia and the Djibouti-Eritrea border standoff. Djiboutian officials were eager to share their views with Representative Payne, and used the occasion to press for increased USG engagement to support the unity government in Somalia and to find a diplomatic solution to the border conflict. END COMMENT.

¶19. (U) CODEL Payne departed Post before having an opportunity to clear this message.
SWAN